

The capitulation of Ukraine and the Finlandisation of Europe: Russia's threats and 'offers'

Marek Menkiszak

Over the past few weeks, the political leadership of the Russian Federation (RF) has issued a series of statements and undertaken actions primarily aimed at Ukraine and the Western countries supporting it. These statements and actions can be divided into two main categories. The first includes threats to escalate the Russian-Ukrainian war to a nuclear conflict between Russia and the West. The second consists of 'offers' not only to end the war but also to begin talks on creating a new security and stability architecture in Eurasia. If these offers were accepted, they would be equivalent to the capitulation of Ukraine, a significant limitation of its sovereignty, and allowing Russia to take effective control of the country. This would also lead to the destruction of the current political and security order in Europe, the disruption of transatlantic ties, and allowing the European continent to be dragged into the orbit of both China and Russia.

Moscow's recent moves are a form of psychological warfare intended to deter Western countries from increasing their support for Ukraine and intensifying pressure on Russia, which would undermine Russian plans for a quick victory. The Kremlin also hopes that the political dynamics in Europe and the US will lead to domestic weakening and mutual conflicts which could facilitate the gradual implementation of its plans for a fundamental revision of the regional and global order.

The threat of escalating the war with Ukraine and the West

Since early May, the rhetoric adopted by the Russian government and its moves against the West and Ukraine have become more aggressive, with nuclear brinkmanship playing a primary role. During a meeting with a group of foreign journalists on 5 June¹ Vladimir Putin announced that, since Western countries had approved of Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory using the missile systems they had supplied, Moscow would consider supplying similar systems to various regions across the world, where they could be used to target assets which are sensitive for those countries that had provided such weapons to Ukraine. The Russian dictator also declared that the Russian Federation reserves the right to take "similar actions" against the countries that "get involved in the war". In this way he suggested that Russia might indirectly – or even directly – attack Western targets.

¹ Встреча с руководителями международных информагентств, Президент России, 5 June 2024, kremlin.ru.



Putin also warned that the West should not assume that Russia would never use tactical nuclear weapons. He pointed out that the criteria for their use include threats to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian state. These criteria are broader than those outlined in the official Russian military doctrine, which mentions a response to a nuclear attack on Russia or a situation posing a threat to the very existence of the Russian state. Earlier, on 17 May, Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov stated² that NATO is teetering on the brink of a direct military conflict with Russia.

This is not the first time Moscow has threatened to escalate the conflict with Ukraine, either horizontally (by transforming it into a war with NATO countries) or vertically (by threatening to use nuclear weapons), knowing how sensitive this is an issue for Western public opinion and political elites. Russia has used such threats in its political and propaganda campaigns in March 2022, September–October 2022 and June 2023. In March 2024 Dmitri Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, assessed³ that the risk of nuclear conflict was a hundred times higher than during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. This time, however, the Kremlin is trying to lend credibility to its threats by taking a wide range of actions.

” **Since early May, both the rhetoric adopted by the Russian government and the moves it has been taking against the West and Ukraine have become more aggressive, with nuclear brinkmanship playing a primary role.**

On 6 May the Russian Ministry of Defence announced exercises involving “non-strategic nuclear forces”.⁴ The first phase of these exercises, featuring missile brigades equipped with Iskander systems, supported by aviation and the navy, started on 21 May in the Southern Military District, which borders Ukraine. Another phase began on 11 June in the Leningrad Military District, in Belarus and in the Baltic Sea, areas which border Finland, the Baltic states and Poland. Russian strategic air force flights accompanied these exercises, and violated Finnish and Swedish airspace on one such occasion.⁵

Russia’s rhetoric towards Ukraine has also become more aggressive. Since late May, Russian politicians have been promoting the narrative that Volodymyr Zelensky’s presidency is illegitimate, given the fact that Ukraine’s presidential elections have been postponed due to the ongoing state of martial law. For instance, Putin made this claim during a meeting with Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 24 May.⁶ He added in an interview on 5 June that Moscow would find a suitable partner in Ukraine with whom it could sign an agreement to resolve the conflict. He elaborated on this during a meeting with the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 14 June,⁷ where he argued in a pseudo-legal analysis that the Ukrainian parliament is the only legitimate body in this country, and any potential peace agreements could be signed with its speaker (currently Ruslan Stefanchuk). These moves are intended to undermine Zelensky’s position on the international stage (the Russian dictator also highlighted the alleged illegality of the security agreements signed by the Ukrainian and US leaders), and they represent a further attempt to destabilise the political situation inside Ukraine.

An extract of Putin’s speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which he stated that Ukraine’s acceptance of the ‘peace’ terms dictated by Moscow would be “decisive for the future existence of the Ukrainian state” could also be interpreted as a threat to Kyiv. The dictator added that if Ukraine

² ‘МИД заявил, что НАТО балансирует на грани прямого конфликта с Россией’, 17 May 2024, www.rbc.ru.

³ W. Rodkiewicz, ‘Moscow’s neo-imperialist plan: Medvedev unveils the Kremlin’s strategic goals’, OSW, 5 March 2024, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ A. Wilk, P. Żochowski, ‘Russia threatens to use tactical nuclear weapons. Day 803 of the war’, OSW, 7 May 2024, osw.waw.pl.

⁵ ‘Finland: Four Russian jets violated airspace, not one’, 15 June 2024, yle.fi.

⁶ P. Żochowski, ‘The latest Putin-Lukashenka meeting: continuing the policy of confrontation with the West’, OSW, 27 May 2024, osw.waw.pl.

⁷ *Встреча с руководством МИД России, Президент России*, 14 June 2024, kremlin.ru.

did not accept the terms, the situation would change and conditions for Kyiv would worsen. This implies further territorial losses caused by another Russian military offensive, and in the extreme case, the annihilation of the Ukrainian state. Medvedev made similar threats in his policy speech in March this year, claiming that the existence of the Ukrainian state is disastrous to its residents and declaring that “Ukraine [is] unquestionably Russia”. The presentation of a map during the abovementioned event showing all of southeastern Ukraine as part of Russia was also an element of psychological warfare. Later Medvedev included a map depicting the whole of Ukraine as a part of the Russian Federation in the greetings that were published on the occasion of Russia Day on 12 June.

Peace the Russian way: Putin dictates the terms to Ukraine...

Besides issuing threats, Moscow is also pretending to have a constructive offer of its own. Since early April 2024, Russian senior officials have publicly suggested that Russia would be ready for ‘peace talks’ to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. These would be based on the demands Russia presented during the negotiations in March 2022 in Belarus and Turkey. This was mentioned on 3 April by then defence minister Sergei Shoigu, and on 11 April by Putin himself during a meeting with Lukashenka.⁸ Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov added that it would be necessary to adjust the demands to the “new reality” (including the annexation of four Ukrainian regions by Russia in autumn 2022). Given all this, the Russian government and its propaganda arm also promoted the false claim that the parties to the conflict had allegedly reached a compromise over the content of the agreement at that time, but that this process had been thwarted by Western countries.

Putin elaborated extensively on this topic during his meeting with the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 14 June.⁹ He outlined two conditions for ending the hostilities in Ukraine: 1) the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces to the administrative borders of the regions annexed by Russia (Russian forces control nearly all of Luhansk oblast and a significant portion of the Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts); 2) Ukraine’s public commitment to abandon its strive to join NATO.

According to the Russian dictator, it is possible to resolve the conflict through negotiations, but Ukraine (and the West) would have to accept the following Russian demands: 1) Ukraine’s acceptance

” Putin has announced the terms for peace with Ukraine; if these demands were fulfilled, Ukraine’s territorial integrity would be severely impaired and its sovereignty would be limited to a very considerable extent.

of the ‘new territorial reality’ (that is, the annexation of Crimea and four other Ukrainian regions); 2) Ukraine adopting a neutral, non-aligned and non-nuclear status; 3) demilitarisation based on the levels of armament discussed in 2022; 4) ‘denazification’ (as defined by Putin on 4 June, this includes banning organisations which support (neo-)Nazi, including Banderist, ideology); 5) guaranteeing rights and freedoms to the Russian-speaking population; 6) adopting peace agreements in the form of international legal acts; and 7) all Western sanctions against Russia being lifted.

If these demands were fulfilled – and they would undoubtedly be further expanded upon and intensified, if such negotiations were to take place – Ukraine’s territorial integrity would be severely impaired and its sovereignty would be limited to a very considerable extent. Kyiv would be deprived of its freedom to conduct foreign and security policy, which would be subordinated to Russian dictates, and it would no longer be able to effectively defend the state. For example, during the Istanbul talks Moscow demanded that Ukrainian armed forces be reduced to 85,000 troops and the National

⁸ W. Rodkiewicz, M. Menkiszak, P. Żochowski, ‘Russia is hoodwinking the West about peace negotiations with Ukraine’, OSW, 15 April 2024, osw.waw.pl.

⁹ *Встреча с руководством МИД России, op. cit.*

Guard to 15,000; its military equipment be limited to include 370 tanks, 1190 infantry fighting vehicles, 74 combat aircraft, 31 combat helicopters and 4 warships; and a maximum artillery and missile range of 40 km be set.

Under the guise of 'denazification', Russia would essentially set the criteria for determining which organisations and individuals are 'radical' and should be excluded from politics, and it would dictate the privileges that it believes should be vested in the Russian-speaking population. Russia would thus obtain the tools it needs to interfere in Ukraine's domestic politics. In turn, the lifting of sanctions would let Russia rapidly expand its capabilities to pursue an aggressive foreign policy, including potential military aggression against its Western neighbours.

...and Europe

In his keynote address at the Russian foreign ministry on 14 June,¹⁰ Putin extended his focus beyond the conflict with Ukraine to outline a vision for a new order in Eurasia. He alleged that the Euro-Atlantic security system had collapsed, and said it was necessary to establish new principles for such a system in the region. The dictator presented a vision for creating a space for equal and indivisible security and mutually beneficial, equitable cooperation across the Eurasian continent. Putin emphasised that this vision aligns fully with and complements Xi Jinping's global security initiatives.

The execution of this vision is to be achieved *inter alia* through the activation of the structures in which Russia is involved, such as the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Integration and cooperation would also cover structures and countries in Southeast Asia (including ASEAN) and the Middle East. As part of the initiative, a series of bilateral and multilateral collective security agreements would be signed in order to bring about the gradual withdrawal of 'non-regional' (meaning American) military forces from Eurasia. In turn, economic cooperation would encompass the creation of bilateral and multilateral payment and settlement systems alternative to the Western ones, as well as new production & trade chains and transport corridors.

During the presentation of his vision for a new Eurasian order, Putin declared that it would also be open to European countries, even NATO members. However, they could only join this order once they

have been 'liberated' from complete military, political, technological, ideological and informational dependence on the US. As he put it, Europe can only avoid marginalisation in this new international order if it revises its current (anti-Russian) policy and develops friendly relations with Russia.

” Putin has presented his vision of a new order in Eurasia; it would inevitably lead to the destruction of NATO and making Europe part of a system dominated by China, where Russia would play the role of a subcontractor.

On the one hand, vague Russian slogans concerning a vision of a new Eurasian order are nothing new. Putin has been promoting the concept of the Greater Eurasian Partnership¹¹ since 2015. This vision, focused on the development of economic cooperation covering such areas as energy, transport and technology, is in fact an attempt to mask Russia's increasing dependence on China and its policies, especially since Beijing announced its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Consequently, Moscow has tried to position itself as an indispensable partner for China while also embedding Chinese policy

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ M. Kaczmarek, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Russia's Greater Eurasia and China's New Silk Road: adaptation instead of competition', *OSW Commentary*, no. 219, 21 July 2016, osw.waw.pl.

within broader multilateral frameworks, primarily the SCO and the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, together with other countries that joined the group in 2023). The Russian dictator already referred to Eurasian integration as a “civilisational project” in his earlier address to the Eurasian forum in Bishkek on 26 May 2022.¹²

On the other hand, there are also new elements in the latest Russian initiatives. Faced with confrontation with the West, Moscow is in-

” Moscow hopes that its threats and false offers will provoke a critical debate in Europe about the risks of escalation and the costs of a prolonged conflict.

creasingly emphasising the comprehensiveness of cooperation, which is now intended to encompass not only the economy but also security, with the latter gradually taking precedence. It is particularly noteworthy that Russian rhetoric is increasingly aligning with that adopted by China.¹³ Despite the current serious conflict between Russia and NATO, the EU and most of their member states, and the severance of political dialogue and the significant reduction in economic exchange with them, Putin is formally extending his offer to European countries, as he is aware of Beijing’s interest in economically penetrating Europe. This offer is contingent on the highly unrealistic demand for their complete severance from the US, which aligns perfectly with the Chinese vision.

Deter, weaken and divide: Moscow’s calculations

The realisation of Putin’s ambitious vision, unlikely though it seems in the foreseeable future, would lead to a kind of Finlandisation of Europe. Discontinuing transatlantic cooperation and eliminating the US’s presence and influence in Europe would inevitably lead to the destruction of NATO and the weakening of the EU, especially in terms of security. If Europe enhanced its economic cooperation with China on the one hand while possibly rebuilding its economic ties with Russia on the other, the politically divided European continent would turn into an area subject to deep economic, and consequently political penetration by Beijing, and to some extent by Moscow, which are increasingly acting in tandem. Europe would become part of a system dominated by China, in which Russia would play the role of a subcontractor.

It does not seem that the Kremlin truly believes that NATO (or its member states) could become directly involved in the war in Ukraine, nor does it appear ready for a serious escalation, especially to a nuclear level. At most, Moscow might decide to further intensify its hybrid war with the West and potentially conduct a nuclear weapons test on its own territory. However, even this latter step carries the risk of negative repercussions from its key non-Western partners.

The intensification of Moscow’s threats, however, is a real expression of concern over the Western community’s recent moves in support of Kyiv. The Kremlin is particularly irritated by several developments: the lifting of restrictions at the end of May on attacks on Russian frontier areas using Western missile systems and Ukrainian combat aircraft; the expansion of anti-Russian sanctions, primarily by the US; the decisions by the EU and G7 to use interest from frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine; the numerous long-term security cooperation agreements signed by Western countries with Kyiv; EU and US initiatives to increase ammunition and weapon production for their own and Ukraine’s needs; and the discussion about sending Western training missions to Ukraine. All these moves could thwart Moscow’s hopes for the collapse of its opponent’s defence and for achieving a relatively quick victory. It is no coincidence that this latest phase of the Russian campaign began after the US Congress approved a \$61 billion aid package for Kyiv at the end of April.

¹² *Первый Евразийский экономический форум*, Президент России, 14 June 2024, kremlin.ru.

¹³ M. Bogusz, W. Rodkiewicz, I. Wiśniewska, ‘Together against the West. Putin in China’, OSW, 21 May 2024, osw.waw.pl.

The Kremlin's immediate goal was to disrupt the peace summit in Switzerland where a plan for the reconstruction of Ukraine was being discussed.¹⁴ Moscow hopes that its threats and shows of power, especially in the nuclear sphere, will provoke a critical debate in Europe about the risks of escalation and the costs of a prolonged conflict. This, it believes, will amplify the voices of the 'peace camp' (politicians, business representatives, experts and journalists who have advocated against increasing support for Ukraine and propose a swift freezing of the conflict at the price of major Ukrainian concessions).

This is what the Kremlin's supposedly constructive 'peace offers' are meant to achieve. These demands, framed as unilateral ultimatums, are designed to create a false impression among some elites and public opinion both inside and outside the West that the conflict can not only be frozen but permanently resolved, resulting in much-desired long-term stability on the European continent. In reality, however, Moscow is hoping for increased instability in Europe, the rise of populist and nationalist forces, the escalation of internal and external conflicts, and most of all, for a crisis in transatlantic relations.

In the short term, Russia's hopes of achieving these goals will be fuelled by the upcoming snap parliamentary elections in France (to be held in late June and early July), and most importantly, the US presidential elections in early November. Even though Russia's 'Greater Eurasia' offer is currently a utopian vision, the Kremlin may be hoping that the political dynamics in key Western countries will gradually favour the implementation of some of its elements.

¹⁴ K. Nieczypor, 'Pax Ukrainica. Ukraine's hopes and expectations ahead of the summit in Switzerland', *OSW Commentary*, no. 601, 4 June 2024, osw.waw.pl.